

HEPATITIS B VACCINE RESEARCH

1. The Minister for Health has decided that the Department will discontinue its support for the pre-production development of a plasma-derived hepatitis B vaccine for routine use being undertaken at the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research, Porton Down. This work stemmed from basic research into hepatitis virology which is continuing at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine under the direction of Professor Arie Zuckerman.
2. The decision was taken in the light of advice from an external group of scientific experts who were unanimous in their view that the project had been overtaken by events, in particular the fact that, simultaneously, developments have occurred in recombinant DNA technology enabling the hepatitis B surface antigen to be expressed in yeast and other cells. Therefore, having made a realistic forecast of the time necessary to complete the remaining research, development and safety testing of the new vaccine, it was clear that in the same period a clinically acceptable and more desirable yeast-derived recombinant DNA vaccine could well become available.
3. Professor Zuckerman's micelling technology, upon which this plasma-derived hepatitis B vaccine was to have been based, is seen, nevertheless, as a technology likely to have a valuable and widespread application to a large number of vaccine products in the future. Professor Zuckerman's research will continue to be encouraged by the Department; for example, the British Technology Group are funding a collaborative venture between the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and a research institute in Sweden which will be applying the micelling technology to a range of synthetic vaccines, including hepatitis B.
4. A plasma-derived vaccine against hepatitis B, manufactured in the United States, is currently licensed for use in this country.